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Author(s): J. Duchesne-Guillemin

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NOTES ON ZERVANISM IN THE LIGHT OF ZAEHNER'S *ZURVAN*,¹ WITH ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN

THERE is a notorious discrepancy among our sources on religion under the Sassanids. According to the foreign witnesses, most of them Christians writing in Armenian or Syriac, the supreme god was Zurvan, the father of Ormazd and Ahriman. This evidence is born out by only one, late, native source, the *Ulemâ i Islam*. All the Pahlavi writings give the very different picture of a dualistic system in which Zurvan has hardly any part to play.

Of Zaehner's predecessors in trying to reconcile this divergence, some, like Christensen, have supposed that Sassanian religion was in fact Zervanism, but that the Muslim conquest brought about a dualistic reaction which tried—with almost complete success—to expurgate from the sacred writings all that was redolent of Zervanism; others—among whom I am sorry I must count myself—have tried to minimize the difference, treating the Zervanite traits in the Pahlavi texts as traces of a tendency which could never prevail. A middle course between these two extremes was struck a quarter of a century ago by O. von Wesendonk (in a book which I was not able to see before writing my *Ormazd et Ahriman*);² this path, thanks to Zaehner, has now become, so to speak, the royal highway to the solution of the riddle.

Before we proceed, however, rapidly to

¹ R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan, a Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955). Pp. xvi + 496. \$13.45. (See now Zaehner's "Postscript to Zurvan," *BSOAS*, 1955, pp. 232 f.)

² J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ormazd et Ahriman* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952). O. G. von Wesendonk, *Das Wesen der Lehre Zarathustras* (Leipzig, 1927)

follow him in this direction, we should stress the fact that he has limited himself to Zervanism from the Sassanian times onwards. He makes but brief references to the question whether it had already been in existence for several centuries. This question, with its corollary of a possible influence of Zervanism on Greek philosophy and Orphism, has been perhaps the liveliest subject of research and controversy among Iranists³ for the last twenty-five years.

Widengren has adduced evidence from Nuzi tablets of the twelfth century;⁴ Junker, Schaeder and Nyberg have seen the fourfold Zurvan in the inscription of Antiochus of Commagene: an interpretation which Zaehner, pages 20 and 31, justly criticizes;⁵ to the testimony of Eudemos *apud* Damascius he makes sporadic allusions, as well as to the mentions of Zurvan in the Avesta.

Nyberg, in his famous *Religionen des alten Iran*, has tried to view the whole Avesta in the perspective of a religious history with Zurvan as the high god, especially in the west of Iran. On his traces, Widengren and Wikander have tackled the perilous task of unraveling the different traditions which may be surmised to have converged into the Avesta. This

³ A brief survey of it will be found in H. Ringgren, *Fatalism in Persian Epics* (Uppsala, 1952).

⁴ The value of this evidence is now discounted by Bailey, *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1935, pp. 37 ff.

⁵ He could have used the refutation given by Nock, *Harvard Theological Review*, 1934, p. 80, if my own (*Ormazd et Ahriman*, p. 123) reached him too late. His book, the Preface tells us, was delivered to the press nearly two years before it came out. It is, by the way, beautifully printed: a fine piece of British craftsmanship.

trend has lately been taken up by Hartman, *Gayōmart*,⁶ with doubtful results.

Zaehner has wisely avoided these quicksands and based his study on the more solid ground of the Sassanian and post-Sassanian evidence, the bulk of which he had already published, translated, and annotated more than fifteen years ago in the *BSOAS*. (These texts and a few others are reproduced, with translation and new notes, in Part Two of the present volume, pp. 273-451.) This voluntary limitation has not prevented him from attaining far-reaching conclusions, as will appear further on. And it has enabled him to situate his whole ideological reconstruction within a positively historical frame.

The religious history of Iran under the Sassanids emerges clearly and convincingly, in Zaehner's picture, as a series of pulsations, of relaxations followed by orthodox reactions.

The first "relaxation" takes place under Shâpur I, whose sympathy with the Manichaeans is well-known⁷ and who ordered Greek and Indian texts to be incorporated into the Avesta.⁸ The first reaction of orthodoxy was the life-work of Kartîr, whose career is now known to us through his own testimony,⁹ although to

⁶ S. Hartman, *Gayōmart, Étude sur le syncrétisme religieux dans l'Iran ancien* (Uppsala, 1953). Reviewed by J. D.-G. in *Review of Religion* (New York).

⁷ The notice, repeated by Zaehner, that Mani had an interview with the King on the latter's accession is based on a false reading of the relevant passage in *Kephalaia*, as A. Maricq has shown in *Ann. de l'Inst. de philol. orient. et sl.* (Bruxelles), 1951, pp. 245-68, and *Recherches sur les Res Gestae Divi Saporis* (1953), chap. ii.

⁸ The subject matter of these texts is reminiscent first of Aristotle and secondly of Zervanism. Their incorporation may have proceeded, as M. Molé contends (*Ann. de l'Inst. de philol. orient. et sl.*, 1952, p. 289), from a desire to compete with Manichaeism and its pretensions to universality.

⁹ Zaehner, p. 11, complains that there should exist no edition of the great Kartîr inscription at the Ka'bah i Zardusht. But one can now find photograph, copy, transliteration, and translation of this and other inscriptions in Sprengling, *Third Century Iran: Sapor and Kartir* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1953).

call him the "Founder of Mazdeism," as does Sprengling, followed by Wikander, *Feuerpriester in Kleinasien* (1946), is unduly to minimize the part of Ardashîr.¹⁰ After some back-sliding in the intervening reigns, this reaction reached its peak under Shâpur II (309) and was the achievement of Adhurbâdh. The rule of orthodoxy lasted until the reign of Yazdagard the "sinner," who was guilty of tolerance; towards the end of his reign and under his successor Yazdagard II there arose Mihr Narse whose so-called edict, frankly Zervanite, is proved by Zaehner, although unauthentic, to represent approximately the official doctrine of the time.

This relaxation of the Mazdean dogma then "runs riot" under Kavâd, the communist king, and another reaction proves necessary: Chosrau I begins his reign—and asserts his authority—by liquidating Mazdakism and all kind of heresy; later on, he can be more tolerant of foreign ideas: the Greek Academicians find refuge at his court.

Under Chosrau II and his successors, all kinds of superstitions tend to overwhelm the Mazdean religion, which gradually disintegrates, thus preparing the triumph of Islam. What will survive in popular conscience under the Muslim varnish is not Mazdeism: it is Zervanite fatalism, well attested in Persian literature. The best evidence of this is found by Zaehner in a long passage of Firdousi which seems to have escaped Ringgren's¹¹ notice.

Thus is explained the discrepancy alluded to above: the foreign documents reflect religion as it was; the native ones describe it as it should have been: as it was defined in times of Mazdean reaction. Traces of the Zervanite doctrine survived

¹⁰ See now G. Widengren, "Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionswissenschaft," in *Numen*, I and II, p. 116 of Part II.

¹¹ See n. 3.

the repeated purges carried on in such periods and after the conquest. This doctrine can with great difficulty be retrieved from these texts, with the help of the scanty foreign evidence.

Zaehner—to jump at once to the main conclusions of his book, page 266—bears out Nyberg's thesis that there must at one time have existed a religion of Time quite independent of Ormazd and Ahriman.¹² In this Zervanism, Infinite Time gives birth to Finite Time, which in turn will be absorbed back into the Infinite.

This doctrine seems to have existed in two variants: one was materialistic, knew of matter in the Aristotelian sense and of the Empedoclean elements. It seems to have entered Iran from the West in the time of Shâpur I; the other was essentially moral and ascetic: undifferentiated Time, a pure potentiality, under the influence of desire cleaves itself into reason (a male principle) and concupiscence (a female one) until in the end disorder, born of this latter principle, is eliminated and God restored in the perfection of his goodness. The introduction of this second form of Zervanism seems also, according to Zaehner, to date back to Shâpur's time, as shown by the preferment of the female Az (Concupiscence) over Ahriman both in it and in Mani's teachings. But where did it originate? Zaehner does not even ask the question, but the system is redolent either of gnosticism or—still better—of Indian

cosmology. Does it not look as though the Vedic hymn (RV. x, 129) where, in an original state of complete undifferentiation, there appears Desire which gives birth to the world, had here combined with the Buddhist tenet that desire is the source of all evil? In fact, a precise Indian influence might be recognized in a circumstance which to Zaehner is not clear, namely the thousand years' sacrifice that accompanies Zurvan's desire to have a son. This must surely not be separated from Prajâpati's sacrifice? The parallel was pointed out by Widengren in *Religionens Värld*², page 71 (a book which seems to have escaped Zaehner's notice), and taken as a proof of high antiquity both for Zurvan and the myth of his begetting the Twins. But since Prajâpati is not Time, nor are his progeny twins, the "sacrifice of fecundity"—his only common trait with Zurvan—seems rather a late Indian accretion to the Iranian god.

Be it as it may, it seems interesting to postulate, as a counter-part to the "Greek" materialistic form of Zervanism, an "Indian" ascetic version of the same. Both doctrines would together constitute the main influx of Greek and Indian ideas under Shâpur. Greek influence on Sassanian Iran has in fact been pinned down on several points, notably by Bailey.¹³ As to Indian influence, Zaehner makes a good start in tracing back the macrocosm-myth in a Pahlavi *Rivâyat* to a Vedic source. More of such borrowings would undoubtedly come to light if one could

¹² The fact that Magians, according to Plutarch, sacrificed both to Ormazd and Ahriman does not imply that they were Zervanites, as Benveniste contended ("Un rite zervanite chez Plutarque," *Journal Asiatique*, 1929, p. 290) despite Plutarch's complete silence about Zurvan. Nor could they be orthodox Mazdeans, as Benveniste rightly pointed out, since a cult of Ahriman is absolutely abhorrent to Mazdeism. Zaehner, p. 13, finds the solution—and settles a twenty-five-year-old dispute—in a Dênkart passage distinguishing three forms of Iranian religion which can be identified with Mazdeism, Zervanism, and sorcery. The sorcerers adore Ahriman but keep up appearances by also professing a cult of Mazdâh. They are those about whom Plutarch tells us.

¹³ In the article quoted in n. 4. Zaehner adds (p. 143): "The reverse has yet to be proved." One misses a reference to Götze's famous "Persische Weisheit in griechischem Gewand," *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Iranistik*, 1923. I hope to show elsewhere that this important thesis, so eagerly adopted by Reitzenstein and long a stumbling-block for both Iranists and Hellenists, has in fact been refuted, if unwittingly, by Kranz, *Kosmos und Mensch in der Vorstellung frühen Griechentums* ("Nachrichten . . . Göttingen," 1938). Cf. *The Harvard Theological Review*, April 1956.

identify the Indian works from which the Iranians have drawn, for example, the *koša* named alongside with Ptolemy's *Megistê* in *Dênkart* (Madan) 428.

The coalescence of these Zervanite doctrines with Mazdeism may be seen under two opposite angles: either Zervanism (in its ethical form) *assimilates* the ethical dualism of the Zoroastrians (Zaehner, p. 269), or conversely, Zurvan (and, for that matter, *Vâyu*) *is absorbed into* the dualistic system of the Mazdeans (p. 90)—only to be ultimately rejected.

In either case, we have to do with a process of mutual adaptation, resulting from historical circumstances. This disposes of the current notion that Zervanism was a philosophical development, a solution adopted, or even invented, by Mazdeans to "surmount" dualism and re-establish the unity of the godhead. There was nothing to surmount, as they do not appear to have felt any intellectual discomfort in dualism.¹⁴ They simply had to take account of Zervanism because it had become too popular to be ignored. The additional doctrine, far from helping them out of a perplexity, was, on the contrary, itself a cause of trouble. It was difficult to adopt Zurvan without jettisoning Ormazd's infinity (Zaehner, pp. 233 ff.).

Anyhow, in the resulting amalgam, Zurvan was the father of the twins Ormazd and Ahriman—an adaptation of the age-old myth of the Twins. The absorption of another high god, *Vâyu*, into Mazdeism offers a parallel case, although the solution was different: "The personality of *Vâyu* was divided into two." In writing this (p. 84), Zaehner *implicitly* rejects Dumézil's view that *Vâyu*'s cleavage was an old feature, anterior at least to the *gâthâs*. One misses a reference to Dumézil's *Tarpeia* (Paris, 1947). It is indeed

deplorable that a scholar of Zaehner's stature should apparently join in the "conspiracy du silence" with which Dumézil's discoveries are met across the Channel.

Zurvan was conceived either as hermaphrodite¹⁵ or as having a female companion. The latter's name, read and explained by Nyberg as *xʾašīzag*, "la petite belle," Zaehner reinterprets as *xʾašvarīg*, "whose xʾarr, whose fortune is fair" (p. 64), a much more fitting name for God's consort.¹⁶

Zaehner justly stresses (p. 106) the difference between the *aiôn*-speculations of the Hellenic world or the ever-recurring *kalpas* of the Hindus and the Iranian theory of Time, in which finite Time's procession from the Infinite and its reabsorption into it is a one-time occurrence.

On the relationship of Zervanism with astrology, Zaehner adopts Cumont's view, shared by many others: it is natural that a religion of Time should have entered Iran along with astrology; but, in his chapter on the Luminaries, he stresses the fact

¹⁵ On Zurvan's hermaphroditic nature, Zaehner repeats Cumont's argument drawn from the lion-headed statues in Mithraism, in all but one of which "the snake conceals the god's genitals." But, even granting that these statues represented Zurvan (see below), the argument has been ruined by new discoveries that have considerably increased the proportion of statues clearly masculine.

As to the identity of the lion-headed god, Zaehner has changed his mind since his book was written, except for the Preface (a short reference to which could perhaps have been inserted on p. 65 on the proofs), where he adopts the suggestion timidly put forward by me in *Ormazd et Ahriman*, p. 128, that the lion-headed statues represented Ahriman. See now J. D.-G., "Ahriman dans les Mystères de Mithra," in *Numen*, or the résumé in the *Acts of the Rome Congress for the History of Religions*, 1955. It would in fact be surprising if Mithraism, essentially a religion of salvation, had for its supreme god that of Zervanism, a doctrine where there is, in Zaehner's terms (p. 261), no hint of salvation.

¹⁶ Mentioning, p. 155, a parallel to this myth, Bel's marriage to the "Mazdean Religion," Zaehner unfortunately reproduces Cumont's misprint, *mazdaianiš*, for *mazdayasniš* (see Reichelt, *WZKM*, XV, 54).

¹⁴ Cf. J. D.-G., *Ormazd et Ahriman*, *passim*.

that "it is a mistake to regard the astrological interpretation of the Universe as specifically Zervanite on the grounds that that sect laid overwhelming emphasis on fate" (p. 163).

The problem of Fate, with the vogue of Zervanism and astrology, thrust itself on the Mazdeans, who were adepts of Free-will. A compromise was found, as is well-known. In Zaehner's terms, "Fate controls material existence only. Man's spiritual destiny is in his own hands." I may be allowed to point out that this (delusively simple) solution was in fact current in the Hellenic world, notably with Posidonius and the Neo-platonists (see Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, II, p. 484).

Taking up a suggestion of Schaeder's, already followed by Nyberg, Zaehner has given systematic attention to Zurvan's tetramorphism. Not only was Zurvan supposed to exist under four different forms, he had moreover many different ways of doing so: there were, so to speak, many versions of his fourfold character. Zaehner recognizes no fewer than six such Tetrads—some of them closely comparable to the Christian Trinity—although he feels compelled to leave aside the one proposed by Nyberg on the basis of the Mazdean month; but he reinterprets the latter in the light of a Pahlavi version of the *Sîh*

rôcak ("The Thirty Days," a part of the Avesta), as Time-Space-Wisdom-Power. The Mazdean text reflects only a semi-Zervanite version of it (phrase Zaehner's), with Ormazd at the head and "Creator" substituted for "Power."

A Tetrad seems even to admit of several interpretations, namely the series Zurvan-Ashôqar-Frashôqar¹⁷-Zarôqar, whose terms appear in various order, with Frashôqar now designating the birth of the Cosmos, now its procession back towards the Infinite. But this is conjectural.

Zaehner's approach is refreshingly sober and undogmatic throughout, his tone a "ton de bonne compagnie": a quality which is the more welcome as it hardly seems the rule in Iranian studies. He modestly gives his work as only a first attempt at a reconstruction of Zervanism. "This book is merely a scaffolding," he writes. "If it is faulty, we can start again. If it is sound, we or others can proceed." As scholars with both the intellectual equipment and the courage necessary to emulate Zaehner are not easily found, his book, in any case, will probably remain, in our time, the standard book of that most intriguing figure of Time, Zurvan.

LIÈGE, BELGIUM

¹⁷ On *fraša-*, see now Bailey's article quoted in n. 4: the term is there convincingly interpreted as "strong, strengthening."